

Woman ordered to Western State surfaces in California

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Wendy Cope, missing for three weeks, has turned up in Yuba City, Calif. But questions remain about why she's not hospitalized. COURTESY PHOTO

On paper, Wendy L. Cope, 48, is supposed to be in Western State Hospital, getting treatment for chronic schizophrenia. Sunday was supposed to be Day 57 of a potential 90-day stint, backed by a court order issued Dec. 11.

In reality, Cope never arrived at the state hospital. Despite the court order and a finding of grave disability, a private mental health provider in Lakewood released her from treatment after three days and sent her home, according to sources familiar with the case.

Until Friday morning, Cope was a missing person: a vanished grandmother, mentally ill, last seen Jan. 17, panhandling at a Fife truck stop without her medicine, her wallet, her money or her phone.

A missing-person alert from Fife police described her as “very friendly and highly vulnerable.”

Two days ago, Cope was found 680 miles from home at a homeless shelter in Yuba City, Calif. — a possible victim of physical abuse, according to a family member who spoke to her on the phone.

“She’s just scared,” said Lori Shuffelen, Cope’s sister-in-law. “She doesn’t know where she is. We’re working on getting her home now. It’s a godsend.”

The outcome was a relief. Family members feared the worst, and police had made little headway in the three weeks since Cope was reported missing.

“We’ve hit all the shelters, all the hospitals, everything,” police spokesman Tom Thompson said Feb. 4, before Cope resurfaced. “If we could get a lead, we’d try it.”

Friday’s good news ended one frantic chapter, but family members remain mystified by the circumstances surrounding Cope’s swift release from treatment into a seemingly shaky environment.

Cope has a long history of contacts with the county mental health system, including at least six involuntary commitments since 2007, sources told The News Tribune. In a recent interview, Shuffelen confirmed those circumstances, noting Cope has spent time at Western State in the past. Her illness first emerged in 1998.

The most recent commitment dated to early December, when Cope’s son brought her to St. Clare Hospital in Lakewood. She’d been behaving strangely at her apartment complex, disrupting other tenants and raising the threat of eviction, sources said.

Her actions and documented illness led to an involuntary civil commitment hearing Dec. 11 in Pierce County Superior Court. The hearing ended with a finding and an order: Cope, deemed gravely disabled, was ordered to Western State for 90 days of treatment.

From there, the details get foggy. Patients court-ordered to Western State don’t necessarily arrive instantly, and the hospital doesn’t always know they’re coming. Initially, Cope was sent to Telecare, an evaluation and treatment center in Lakewood, adjacent to the state hospital grounds.

Telecare contracts with OptumHealth, the private company that provides mental health service to Pierce County under a state contract. Optum heads the regional support network for Pierce County — one of 11 such entities in the state, though the others are public agencies.

Some networks notify Western State when they receive patients court-ordered to the hospital. Others, including Optum, do not, said Ron Adler, the state hospital’s CEO. At his prior job running a similar state facility in Alaska, he grew accustomed to a “legal desk” that receives notice of court orders. Western State has no such system, he said.

Without the notifications, he cannot say how many cases similar to Cope's run through the state system. In other words, he can't say how many patients ordered to Western State never arrive.

"Some of the (regional support networks) share the court orders with us. Some of them don't — there's an issue there," Adler said. "I just asked about that last month, and we weren't getting them. That was an issue several months ago that we identified, and we are attempting to rectify it."

Adler did not know Optum's policy regarding notifications to the state hospital.

"That would be a very good question for Optum," he said. "That's a problem — if we're not getting the court orders from the court, we really don't know who we're responsible for. There should be a direct link between us and the court."

The News Tribune sought answers from Optum and asked several questions regarding general release policies and notifications to Western State.

Specifically, The News Tribune asked whether Optum notifies the state hospital when its patients are court-ordered to state commitment. The newspaper also asked whether Optum considers the home environment where a patient is to be released.

Optum's CEO, Cheri Dolezal, did not answer any of those questions, but she responded with a general statement issued through a spokesman.

"Optum is committed to helping people with mental health needs achieve long-term recovery," the statement said. "We have clear standards and procedures established to help ensure people receive the right care, at the right time and place."

Citing court records, sources told The News Tribune that Telecare released Cope from treatment Dec. 14, three days after she'd been ordered into 90 days of treatment. Shuffelen, Cope's sister-in-law who lives in Blaine, said Cope was discharged to the care of her 30-year-old son. Family members weren't happy with that decision.

"He's not somebody that should have been trusted with her care at all," Shuffelen said. "He is not capable of taking care of her."

The statement reflects a long-running family dispute. The son's recent legal history in Pierce County Superior Court includes three restraining-order petitions signed by three women between Oct. 18 and Dec. 9. All complain of harassment, violence or threats of violence, and continuing drug use.

The News Tribune was unable to reach Cope's son.

In theory, patients with mental illness released from treatment should depart with treatment plans intended to ease their transition into the community. Depending on the severity of the patient's

illness, the treatment plan can be reviewed by the court. In Cope's case, there is no indication of such a release review.

Shuffelen spent Friday on the phone with relatives, trying to reconstruct her sister-in-law's movements over the past three weeks.

She said Cope was dropped off at the Fife truck stop Jan. 17, and was seen panhandling. Eventually, she got a ride from a truck driver, who rolled south to California.

"It sounds like, from my understanding, that this truck driver took a lot of advantage of Wendy," Shuffelen said.

Two days later, Cope's son reported her disappearance to Fife police, Thompson, the police spokesman, said.

The truck driver reportedly left Cope at a Walmart parking lot in Yuba City. From there, she found her way to a homeless shelter. For days, no one knew who she was, until she mentioned a relative's name.

Thompson confirmed Cope's whereabouts Friday evening after speaking with police in Yuba City. The details of her return still were unsettled Friday night.

Technically, the 90-day order to Western State is still active. This time, Shuffelen hopes her sister-in-law gains entry and gets treatment.

"Wendy finally got coherent enough," Shuffelen said. "She finally got coherent enough. Now the thing is trying to bring her back and save whatever of Wendy is left."

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